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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, MARCH 2-13

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series from U.S. Office Almaty focuses on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital."

ALMATY MASLIKHAT ELECTIONS

¶2. Bi-elections for the Almaty maslikhat (local legislature) will take place on March 29. According to the city's electoral commission, 28 candidates will be competing for three seats. Only one of the candidates is officially representing a political party -- in this case, the small, pro-government Adilet party -- with the rest having registered themselves as "independents." The key opposition parties are boycotting the bi-elections, claiming that the electoral system is inherently unfair.

OPPOSITION PARTIES MULLING OVER STABILITY MEMORANDUM

¶3. The opposition Azat party, National Social Democratic Party (NSDP), and Communist Party are still mulling over whether to sign a "memorandum on stability" initiated by the ruling Nur Otan party. The memorandum includes a promise to refrain from protest actions until the economic situation improves. On March 13, several pro-government parties -- Rukhaniyat (Spirituality), Adilet (Justice), the People's Communist Party, and the Party of the Patriots -- signed the memorandum. Alikhan Baimenov's Ak Zhol party, sometimes considered to be the government's "pocket opposition," is expected to sign soon. Nur Otan party secretary Yerlan Karin criticized Azat, OSDP, and the Communist Party for being dilatory in signing the memorandum, saying they must be too busy "coordinating their positions." OSDP deputy head Amirzhan Kosanov told "Novaya Gazeta" newspaper that the three parties are "no simpletons" who would blindly sign on to a document put together unilaterally by Nur Otan.

DIRE STRAITS FOR SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESS

¶4. The Independent Association of Entrepreneurs issued an appeal to President Nazarbayev to take urgent action to improve the economic situation. Small- and medium-sized enterprises are in dire straits, said the statement, and if the situation does not improve, the Association will organize a protest rally on March 22. In their appeal, these entrepreneurs asked for assistance in refinancing

loans, postponing debt payments, and allowing them to pay back dollar-denominated loans in tenge.

NUR OTAN, AZAT PARTIES DISCUSS HOUSING ISSUES

15. The opposition Azat party and the ruling Nur Otan party discussed Almaty housing issues during a meeting of the Almaty city administration's Council on Social Conflicts. Both parties are represented on the Council. The issues discussed included illegally constructed houses in the Bakai district and "dolshiki" (i.e., individuals who invested money into apartments that were never completed). Over 350 families in the Bakai area are seeking to legalize the houses they built without proper land ownership rights, but the local administration said it does not have the authority to do this. The Council recommended that every case be considered individually and decided to set up a working group on the problems of the "dolshiki." The Council also decided to ask the Procurator General to file a criminal case against Oleg Nam, a member of the Almaty maskikhat and owner of the KUAT construction company. He has been accused of failing to pay KUAT employees for more than one year. The Council will also appeal to the masklikhat to unseat Nam as a maslikhat member.

"DOLSHIKI" PICKET DISTRESSED ASSET FUND

16. On March 11, "dolshiki" from the "Leave the Houses to People" movement picketed the office of the government's Distressed Assets Fund in Almaty. The activists wanted to meet with the head of the fund, but were told that he was out. The protesters threatened an escalation of protest actions if the Distressed Assets Fund does not immediately buy out their bad mortgages. The activists delivered a petition and then dispersed.

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INSPECTION REVEALS LABOR VIOLATIONS

17. A procurator from Almaty's Bostandyk district inspected 22 large companies in Almaty and discovered numerous violations of labor law. The most frequent violation is a failure to pay employees their salaries. As a result of the inspections, almost 2,000 employees received their wage arrears. At some companies, management paid to local workers salaries two to three times lower than those paid to expatriate employees. Their licenses to hire foreign employees have been revoked by a court.

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